

Island of Pleasure

Hillhouse Opera Company takes on a rarely-heard masterpiece

By Daniel Stephen Johnson

Handel's *Alcina*

7:30 p.m., Nov. 5-6; 1:30 & 7:30 p.m., Nov. 7. Pratt Hall, 311 Temple St. \$5-\$25 suggested donation. hillhouseoperacompany@gmail.com, hillhouseoperacompany.org.

The music itself was only one part of what convinced singer/stage director Victoria Leigh Gardner to put on a production Handel's *Alcina*. The opera also offers numerous roles for the local community's wealth of talented female singers, as well as the opportunity for the Hillhouse Opera Company to present a rarely performed piece of the operatic repertoire.

Also: "It has a hippogriff!" Gardner exclaims, half-deadpan. "It was like Harry Potter!"

It was at this point that I realized Gardner's priorities might be slightly different from those of more jaded classical presenters. She was all enthusiasm — for the production and about the story.

But that only makes sense.

Hillhouse is a company that runs on pure enthusiasm. That explains why the brand-new opera company is entering its second season in an economic environment in which professional opera companies are becoming an endangered species.

"Our mission is to provide quality operatic productions [and to] eliminate barriers that prevent people in the community from coming," she says.

"We do like getting donations, because basically there are expenses associated with this, and we're too young to get any grants right now," but "it's a mostly volunteer production. ... Most expenses come out of the pockets of board members."

Everything else comes from a love of the art.

"People have been really generous with lighting and costumes, and people have been really generous with their time. Our chorus is very faithful. They've been with us from the beginning."

But enough about them.

Let's get back to that hippogriff!

Alcina, based on an episode in Ariosto's epic romance *Orlando Furioso*, tells the story of the titular Circe-like sorceress, who lures shipwrecked travelers to become her lovers and then, when she grows bored, transforms them into the enchanted animals and scenery that populate her island.

Alcina's "island of pleasure," as Gardner puts it, runs into trouble when its population of roman-



"It has a hippogriff!" exclaims Hillhouse Opera's stage director Victoria Leigh Gardner. "It was like Harry Potter!" This hippogriff is from Gustave Doré's illustration of *Orlando Furioso*.

tic conquests is joined by Ruggiero, who flies in on his girlfriend's hippogriff (maybe a hybrid of a griffin and a horse); unfortunately for *Alcina*, Ruggiero's girlfriend turns out to be Bradamante, a fearless warrior-woman, who's looking for him.

The plot is crammed with magic: magic spells, a magic wand, a magic ring, a magic urn, and, of course, the magic rocks and trees and creatures that have fallen prey to *Alcina*'s spell.

Expect gender roles to be bent beyond the breaking point as *Alcina* attempts to play Don Juan to a Bradamante disguised in knightly drag. To make matters more complicated, the role of Ruggiero, Bradamante's spellbound fiancé, will be played by a woman at each performance, instead of the eunuch Handel originally cast in the role.

But in the end, as Gardner puts it, "They come back to the real world — because reason triumphs over superstition and magic — which was very popular" during the Enlightenment.

Of course, we live in enlightened times now, too. We would never believe in hippogriffs or magic wands. On the other hand, we might never believe that a volunteer, community opera company could program a work as ambitious as Handel's *Alcina* if we couldn't see it with our own eyes. ■

Daniel Stephen Johnson writes music criticism at danielstephenjohnson.blogspot.com.

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